

Reading The Silences Within Critical Feminist Theory

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Abstract:

This paper reviews the literature produced on gender and critical literacy, particularly research which has drawn on Kristeva's (1986) three tier model of women's work to inform critical feminist literacy curriculum. It examines the strengths and limitations (silences) in this literature, and then proposes an alternative reading of Kristeva which draws on the work of postcolonial theorists. A postcolonial interpretation of Kristeva's (1986) theory of how the sign or representation of 'woman' is constructed enables an analysis of the 'difference' within the category 'woman' not only the relational 'difference' symbolically constructed between 'man' and 'woman'. Kristeva (1986) proposes that in the space of the postmodern nation, such as Australia, symbolic representation in the form of the sign of 'woman' is constituted in and through three temporal relations. Kristeva's three temporal relations can be described as: (1) Monumental time (eternity), (2) Cyclic time, and (3) Linear or cursive time. From this perspective, the present of women's time (monumental, cyclical and linear) is a zone of representational instability. That is, the representation of women in and through the sign 'woman' becomes the site of continual challenge and reconstruction. It is from this instability of cultural signification that the literary canon comes to be articulated as a dialectic of various temporalities - modern, colonial, postcolonial, feminist, post feminist, poststructural feminism(s), 'native', traditional - that cannot be a knowledge that is stabilized in enunciation. In this time, 'woman' does not signify the female body as an *a priori* historical presence, a discursive object; but a discursive subject constructed in the performance of the narrative.

Reading The Silences Within Critical Feminist Theory

This article initially written in July 1994 is a critical response to the paper '*Discourses on Gender and Literacy: Changing the Stories*' (Gilbert, P.) written in August 1993. The criticism is historically contextualised and therefore situates this text in the wider corpus of discourses on gender and literacy produced under the authorship of Gilbert (1989a, 1989b, 1992), and Gilbert and Taylor (1991). A postscript in this article examines the theoretical assumptions in critical feminist literacy texts which deal with gender, difference, disadvantage and literacy (*specifically* Gilbert, 1993; 1995; Gilbert and Gilbert, 1995).

The theorisation in this paper is aimed at opening up, rather than closing off, the issues within feminisms and education in Australia. Consequently, this paper examines the theoretical imperatives in the above corpus of work, focussing specifically on the article '*Discourses of Gender and Literacy: Changing the Stories*'. In order to foster constructive debate within critical feminist theory I have chosen to focus on the discursive conditions which produce specific theoretical positions. With this in mind, I do not give "authority for the meaning of a text" to a single author (Spivak, 1993: 217). What I mean by this is that writers rely upon particular discursive resources in order to produce texts. Therefore it is necessary to examine the discursive conditions for the production of theoretical texts rather than give authority to a single writer for the meaning of a text. Taking this into account, I set out in this paper to critique a set of discursive practices which have produced a particular set of critical feminist texts. My aim is to analyse the power/knowledge relations through which discursive silences are constructed even while an agenda of inclusivity is championed.

Feminism as Counter-Discourse

For me, as for many, research on gender and literacy (*specifically* Gilbert 1989a, 1989b, 1993 August) has opened up a set of reading practices which enable me, as a woman, to read from a position which is Other to the 'Other' of patriarchy (Irigaray, 1992; 1993). This writing has given me a means of speaking and understanding myself which contests and challenges the deficit constructions of woman in relation to man. By giving me this discursive resource, that is, a critical feminist reading practice, the research on gender and literacy has enabled me to view social reality, my social identity and my social relationships differently. These feminist writings have shown me that gender differences are socially and culturally produced. Gender differences are not natural or the way the world was meant to be.

Furthermore, this corpus of work has persistently challenged the everyday or common-sense

practices of schooling and encouraged teachers and policy makers to view this social reality from a feminist or 'girl friendly' perspective. This can never be an easy process. Gender identities, constructed in and through the everyday practices of schooling, often remain unquestioned. To challenge established practices, that is, to contest the power relations of patriarchy is likely to be met with resistance and opposition. Under these circumstances, and relentlessly for many years, theorists working in the area of gender and literacy (*specifically* Gilbert 1989a; 1989b; 1992; 1993 August) have persistently brought to the attention of educators the gendered construction of reality.

For example, Gilbert (1989a; 1989b) and Gilbert and Taylor (1991) analysed the invisible or naturalised power-knowledge relations invested in discourses of liberal and child-centred literacy classrooms. They proposed that the social construction of educational discourses as 'natural', 'individualist', 'personalised' and 'child-centred' mitigates against the possibility of equitable practice. Positioned within liberal educational discourse, the teacher cannot gain access to ways of identifying and dealing with inequitable relations of power and gender production. Institutionalised inequality is naturalised and personalised so that it becomes hegemonic (Gilbert, 1989a).

Despite the need to contest or deconstruct gendered practices, these critical feminist positions do not overly dwell on the regulatory practices of patriarchy. By drawing on their won personal and professional experiences, feminists in the area of gender and literacy (*specifically* Gilbert, 1993 August) argue that discourses of patriarchy can be disrupted. For example, Gilbert (1993, August) proposes that feminist literature gives her the language and a set of meanings, to view practices of patriarchy differently. And this different way of reading the word and the world has been and continues to be empowering.

Gilbert (1993, August) translates her personal empowering experience with feminist literature to the practical reality of classroom practice. The empowerment of girls, Gilbert and Taylor (1991) Freebody, Luke and Gilbert (1991) and Gilbert (1993, August) propose is achieved through the acquisition of strategies of 'reading against the grain' or deconstructing the phallogocentrism within discourses. Phallogocentrism refers to the logic of binary oppositions which centre the phallus or self of man as the norm and woman as the negative or deficit 'Other'. Drawing on the work of Derrida, poststructural feminists have proposed that the structure of Western language is based on the binary oppositional logic of gendered difference. Within this logic 'woman' signifies or means something 'Other' than, or different from 'man'. And because the logic of the Western symbolic system places man at the centre, 'woman' is read or interpreted as negatively

different from 'man'. The logic of this language system however, can be deconstructed and reconstructed so that the sign of 'woman' is produced through *différance*. In this context, Derrida's use of *différance* implies that the meaning associated with a sign, for example in this instance 'woman', is constantly deferred or suspended and therefore capable of being reconstructed to mean something Other than the 'Other' of 'man' (Grosz, 1989; Irigaray, 1992; Whitford, 1991).

In their study of teenage girls, popular culture and literacy practices, Gilbert and Taylor (1991) found that not all girls read romance novels in the same way. Reading practices are learned because children learn to take up various subject positions which allow the text to be framed in specific ways. If reading positions, Gilbert and Taylor (1991) argue, are socially constructed, then girls should be taught how to read against the grain of patriarchal texts. That is, students need to question the natural construction of gendered difference.

This process of challenging commonsense views of gendered identity and practices must begin with students' experiences. Only by working on students' personal constructions of gender can teachers attempt to challenge feminine subordination. However, challenging students' constructions of gendered identity is not simply a matter of rational, logical debate. The power of gender ideologies lies in the fact that they work at an emotional level, through the structuring of desires, as well as at a rational level. Deconstructing emotional attachments through analysis of personal lives, however, is problematic. It is personally threatening for many students to place their lives under scrutiny as their very sense of themselves is at stake (Gilbert & Taylor, 1991).

Within this theoretical perspective, challenging students' personal constructions of gender is only the first stage in the process of contesting gender difference. The second stage is to enable students to 'try out' or experiment with different gendered positions. In other words, students are encouraged to read and write from different discursive positions. That is, girls are encouraged to take on the role of the lead character in a story, be adventurous and take risks. Boys can try to write about topics other than war and action heroes, and place female characters in the centre of their texts rather than in subservient roles.

These stages in challenging patriarchy and reconstructing discourses which provide powerful speaking and writing positions for boys and girls are based on Kristeva's (1986) theoretical work. Gilbert (1993, August) proposes that Kristeva's (1986) three tier model of women's work provides a guide by which women can challenge and incorporate their voices within the current literacy curriculum. Briefly, the first level of challenge to the patriarchal literacy curriculum is to

gain access to the dominant symbolic order. The second phase is to set up oppositional knowledge(s) and construct alternative symbolic order(s) which represent the interests and lived experiences of marginalised groups. The third phase operates on the principle of incorporating alternative meaning systems into the dominant symbolic order. That is, women must create and incorporate alternative ways of reading, writing and speaking in order to express their lived experiences. Moreover, using this theoretical framework Gilbert (1993, August) proposes that women must challenge the patriarchal symbolic order which operates on the Cartesian logic of male/female dualisms to create multiple stories and ways of being and living. In this way, both men and women will have available to them, alternative stories by which they can construct their subjectivities and practices.

Feminism as a Discourse of Exclusion

Don't you just hate it when reviewers or critics write about what you did not say rather than what you did (Ball, 1994: 108).

This theoretical analysis of 'fashioning' gendered identities as an instrument of patriarchy has helped me to come to terms with the constructedness of what I had been socialised and educated to believe were natural instincts and behaviours without which I could not be a 'proper' or 'good' woman. But for all that this research has given me, it also has taken something away. What this research has taken from me is my racialised, socio-economic, gendered identity. By constructing difference as a gendered difference and silencing 'Other' differences of race and class which interweave with gender; my identity, my voice, my practices have been silenced. And power-knowledge relations work through these silences. What remains unspoken in this theoretical analysis are the differences within the category 'woman'. And from this position, no matter how I now look at this theoretical work, the pain of being excluded from the Western feminist 'Other' leads me to suggest that critical feminist discourse (of the variety practised within this theoretical model) does **not** have an agenda of inclusivity.

On this subject, Ann du Cille (1994: 613) writing about the meaning of Adrienne Rich's poetry '*Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*' (1986) for herself as a black woman writes

.. I "discovered" this essential book at a critical moment in my life and in the development of my feminism: on the eve of my fortieth birthday, as I wrestled with the likelihood of never having a child. .. But for all that Rich's book gave me, it also took something away; and what it snatched from me, ironically and perhaps a little unfairly, has come to mean almost as much to me as what it gave. ... To the double silences of sexism and racism Rich adds a third: the silence and blindness of feminism. Like Jane Gallop, who I am sure meant to praise Deborah McDowell, Adrienne Rich no doubt means to honor the woman who cared for her as a child. But the poetry of her prose should not disguise the paternal

arrogance of her words or mask the annihilating effect of her claim on the being she resurrects and recreates as "my Black mother."

Ann du Cille (1994: 613) goes on to argue

Even ten years later, (in the revised edition of the book) Rich has failed to recognize that she is talking about another woman - another woman who is not her black mother but a laborer whose role as mammy is also socially, politically and economically constructed.

Similarly, I propose that despite all that I have gained from the theoretical research on gender and literacy (*specifically* Gilbert, 1993 August) I feel that, as a subject positioned by race, social-class and gender, I have been silenced. And I propose that if educational feminisms are to be inclusive of all women, not just the minority of white bourgeois women, then these silences within feminisms, the differences within the category 'woman', must be debated and researched.

Currently, counter discourses within the academy, the 'Other' of the speaking subject, Western feminisms make distinctions between white women and 'women of color'. In the discourses of the Western academy white lady is the symbol of purity, innocence, sexual chastity, virginity - the princess with blonde hair in the castle. This focus on the desires and lived reality of the white middle class woman is explicit in the selection, organisation and interpretation of data within the article '*Discourses on gender and literacy: Changing the stories*' (Gilbert, 1993 August)

One day there was a little girl called Kathleen. She found a gold pot. It was a useful pot. She rubbed it. A genie came out of it. The genie said "You have three wishes."

"I wish I had the prettiest dress in the whole world."

"But now it's your second wish."

"I wish I had long blonde hair."

"I wish I was a princess in a castle."

Then she got her three wishes. Then she was happy. In the castle the next day she got married with a handsome prince and they lived happily ever after.

THE END (8 year old girl)

In this text there is no detailed theorisation or analysis of the data. Rather, the reader is called upon to "read difference". The power/knowledge relations by which "difference" is constructed within this text are naturalised, so that the reader is positioned to notice only gendered difference: it is difficult not to notice initially the differences here: not to notice the difference in story structure ... storybook characters and mechanisms

But this data about a girl desiring to be white, middle class, and heterosexual constructs differences **other** than gender. In this explanation of the data differences based on social economic position, race and sexual preference are **not** considered worthy of 'notice'. The complexity of economic, racial and homophobic discourses which construct the Australian rural

cultural world from which the children construct their stories is erased. Effectively this selection, organisation and interpretation of data silences differences within the symbolic category 'boy' and 'girl'. Power speaks through these silences.

Within the text *'Discourses of Gender and Literacy: Changing the Stories'* (Gilbert, 1993 August) the signifier of white girl writing about a white princess with blonde hair is used as representative of all girls. This text identifies a significant difference in the construction of stories written by boys and girls in primary schools. Within this specific theorisation of gender and literacy it is argued

And the difference - which in these two texts is quite marked - comes down predominantly to a gender difference: to a gendered difference in the way in which these two children have drawn upon their cultural worlds to construct classroom stories (Gilbert, 1993 August: 6)

However, gender difference is not the only difference produced in these particular children's stories, neither is it the most significant difference. The children's stories to which the theorisation refers draw not only on gendered discourses, but also racialised and socio-economic discourses. The children's texts (re)produce the power relations of a post-industrial capitalist society with its inherent oppressions. While gender power relations in the texts are constructed and now read as visible, other interweaving oppressions, such as race, class, and sexual preference speak through the power-knowledge relations of silence, of invisibility.

By colluding in the process of silencing 'Other' differences this theorisation on gender and literacy (Gilbert, 1993 August) does not acknowledge the complexity and hybridity of discourses which construct gendered subjectivities. I propose that a gendered analysis which only examines sexual difference between white men and white women, fails to acknowledge the sexual difference on which racial and classed difference is constructed. That is, sexual difference constructed through the binary male/female is also constituted in the difference of white woman/colored woman, white woman/colored man, white man/colored man, white man/colored woman.

The 'Other' of the white princess, the woman that is silenced - the black, brown, olive, dark, yellow woman - the 'woman of color' is base. In this fantasy, the 'woman of color' as sexual object is not valuable, is either unworthy of being rescued by the prince, or must be rescued from her own 'uncivilised kind' to serve the interests of the white male. The 'woman of color' is the symbol of sexual promiscuity, the oversexed-black-Jezebel¹, repressed sexuality waiting for liberation from the white phallus - "or more precisely, the yellow girl - represents the mirror

image of the white woman on the pedestal. Together, white and black women stand for woman as madonna and whore" (Painter, 1992: 207).

Represented by the signifier 'woman of color', 'racialised subject', 'subaltern sexed subject', 'Third World immigrant woman' I have become an object either suppressed through silence within the category of 'universal woman' which signifies only bourgeois white woman; objectified as the 'etc' or the arithmetic add-on of patriarchal oppressions; or exoticised as an 'interesting' comparison to white women. The problem with this form of western critical feminism is not only that it silences issues of race, but equally importantly when race and gender are evoked to incorporate difference "it is often from a racist perspective and reasoning" (Amos & Parmar, 1984: 4).

The signifier 'color' is used here to refer to 'non-white'. European colonisation is based on the scientific, economic project of modernity which incorporates the centrality of the white phallus. That is, the logic of modernity is based on the discursive construction of binary opposites in which the second of the binary pair denotes the negative. In addition, the logic of modernity, logocentrism, is centred on the self of the European male constructed during the Enlightenment. The logic of this discourse is captured in Spivak's (1988: 296) statement: "White men are saving brown women from brown men." What this means is that Spivak's 'brown woman' or 'sexed subaltern subject' is constituted through imperialist discourses. Imperialism's image as the establisher of the good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as *object* of protection from her own kind (Spivak, 1988: 299).

I am not implying that the signifier 'color' encapsulates and represents the racialised experiences of all 'non-white' subjects. Clearly, there exist differences and hierarchies of oppressions within the category 'the subject of color'. As Luke (1994) suggests race and racial identity are historically generated and socio-culturally produced regimes of difference and power. From the vantage of those persons invested with the power to define the terms of difference, the discourse of the 'White Australia Policy' aimed to exclude all non-white, namely non-British and non-European people from entry into Australia. At the same time, discourses about Australia's Indigenous or First Nations people negated the differences of language, location, socio-cultural practices under the category 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' and used pseudo scientific techniques of blood sampling to ascertain degree of 'Aboriginal authenticity'.

What I am proposing is that the project of European expansion was based not only on an ideology of patriarchy but also of imperialism in which white bourgeois women colluded in the

oppression of 'non-white', of 'colored' subjects. Furthermore, the 'herstory' which white women use to trace the roots of women's oppression is an imperial history rooted in the prejudices of colonial and neo-colonial periods, a 'herstory' which suffers an historical amnesia by ignoring the fundamental ways in which white women have gained from the oppression of 'Other' women: 'women of color', 'ethnic women', 'Indigenous women' (Amos & Parmar, 184). On this point, and referring to the forms of feminism in educational theory, Tsolidis (1990: 57) argues that

the analysis which has dominated the girls' education debate has, by and large, been ethnocentric. It operates within a schema which defines Australian in dominant cultural terms only. To be Australian is to be Anglo-Celtic and to be female and non-Anglo-Celtic is to be pitied.

Women's Time: Reading Racialised Gendered *Differance*

In this section of the paper I use Barthes' (1977) notion of the death of the author and the birth of the reader to provide an alternative reading of Kristeva's (1986) concept of women's time. I propose, following Barthes (1977) that the truth of a text cannot be ascertained from the authorial voice. The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author. Spivak (1993: 217-218) proposes:

Barthes is writing here not of the death of the writer (although he *is* writing, quite copiously, of writing) or of the subject, or yet of the agent, but of the *author*. The author, who is not only taken to be the authority for the meaning of a text, but also, when possessed of authority, possessed *by the fact* of "moral or legal supremacy, the power to influence the conduct or action of others;" and, when authorizing, "giving legal force to, making legally valid"

Barthes (1977: 145-146) announces the birth of the reader who "is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted." The writer is, in this sense, a reader at the performance of writing. In other words, there can never be only one truth, one authorial voice, or one reading of Kristeva's (1986) work. If I want to know the truth about Kristeva's text my task is not to scrutinise the text for insight about Kristeva's (1986) true intent. Rather, I am interested in the discursive conditions which allowed Kristeva (1986) to produce this text, as well as the discursive conditions in which I am positioned to interpret this text in specific ways (Spivak, 1993).

In contrast to the theoretical interpretation of Kristeva (1986) in the text '*Discourses on gender and literacy: Changing the stories*' (Gilbert, 1993 August), which I have already outlined in this paper, I suggest an alternative reading using the discourse of post and anti-colonial writers (Bhabha, 1990). I am not suggesting that post or anti-colonial discourse is homogeneous.

Indeed, writers who position themselves as postcolonial have vastly contradictory responses to Kristeva's work. Spivak (1993: 17) an Indian/Bengali-US writer has this to say

I'm repelled by Kristeva's politics: what seems to me to be her reliance on the sort of banal historical narrative to produce "women's time"; what seems to me Christianizing psychoanalysis; what seems to me to be her sort of ferocious Western Europeanism; what seems to me to be her long-standing implicit positivism; naturalizing of the chora, naturalizing of the presemiotic. I'm so put off by this that I can't read her seriously anymore, so it is more my problem. I mean, I'm not generous and catholic enough to learn from her anymore.

Similarly, Rey Chow (1991: 6) a Chinese-US postcolonial writer criticises Kristeva for her interpretation of the Chinese practice of maiming women's bodies through foot-binding. Chow (1991) argues that Kristeva's Eurocentric interpretation of this practice suggests that Chinese women become men's equal in the symbolic order through the practice of foot binding. Instead of seeing women in an active discursive role expressing discontent with this practice, Kristeva's reading says that in your suffering you are the bearers of Chinese culture (Ram, 1993).

While I agree with both of these interpretations of Kristeva's writing, I want to offer an alternative reading of *'Women's Time'* by using the research of Homi Bhabha (1990) an Indian-British postcolonial writer. Rather than deconstructing Kristeva's text for its Eurocentric assumptions and arguing that it has nothing to offer educators in Australian schools, I want to build on theoretical research in the area of gender and literacy (*specifically* Gilbert, 1993 August).

What I am proposing then is a reading of Kristeva (1986) which attempts to erase the Eurocentric bias and enable an understanding of the differences within the category 'woman'. In the text *'Discourses on gender and literacy: Changing the stories'* a critical feminist reading of Kristeva's (1986) theory has been articulated. I suggest that an alternative reading, that is a postcolonial reading (Bhabha, 1990) of the same text, will enable an analysis of the differences within the category 'woman', which have not been made visible in Gilbert's (1993, August) reading of children's writing practices. Consequently the differences within the category 'woman' have been silenced and suppressed, and only the differences between the category 'woman' and 'man' have been made visible.

I have both a personal and professional desire to speak about the differences which have been erased in the text *'Discourses on gender and literacy: Changing the stories'* (Gilbert, 1993 August). I am one of those women whose gendered ethnic difference has been violently suppressed. And under these circumstances I believe that we should no longer ask the question -

why are ethnic people, Indigenous people, 'people of color' silent from literary practices, textual representations? The question that needs to be asked is - what symbolic violence has been committed to erase the presence of 'people of color' in a society seething with their presence? (Carby, 1989; Morrison, 1989).

Postcolonial, anti-colonial and black feminist theory has evolved out of a desire to raise these questions, that is, shift the problem from one which focuses solely on patriarchy as the source and site of oppression. Postcolonial theory attempts to understand, give meaning to, the lives, experiences and identities of people once the objects of colonisation.

Mass world wide immigration has dislocated and relocated people from the former colonies of Europe, and produced nations such as Australia with a 'multicultural identity'. The immigrant people in the Australian nation constitute part of the diaspora. As diasporic people they have been objects of colonisation and immigration. They have been scattered across the globe but still retain some relationship with 'traditional' or 'home' cultures, even though these relationships are fraught with ambiguity. At the same time, the people of the diaspora, are constantly producing, negotiating and reconstructing their 'ethnic identities'. That is, their 'ethnic identity' is not traditional or primitive in relation to Anglo-Australian identity which has been constructed as the norm, but lives with and through difference, by hybridity.²

Let me be clear. The context of my struggle as an Asian-Australian woman is not only patriarchal discourses, but also the racist legacy which has constructed the imagined community (Anderson, 1991) of the Australian nation as white British. This racist legacy lives on, well after racist policies and legislation have been repealed, and discourses of inclusion and 'difference within women' have been evoked, in the research of contemporary Australian feminists. Historically, white middle-class women have excluded working class, non-British migrant (Brook, 1994; Kilic, 1994; Reade, 1994; Vasta, 1993; Tsolidis, 1993) and Indigenous women (Huggins, 1991; Pettman, 1992; Yeatman, 1993) from the gains and benefits of feminist movements. Within this racialised historical context women's bodies are marked by age, social class, race, sexual preference, and, mental and physical difference. Of principal concern to me in this paper is the way women's bodies are racially marked as 'white middle class' and 'woman of color'. The signifiers of 'whiteness' and 'color' are neither fixed or static, rather they are ambiguous and shifting (Perera, 1992). 'Color' has never been just there waiting to be discovered as the site of oppression or authentic identity. It has always been an unstable identity, psychically, culturally, and politically. It, too, is a narrative, a story, a history. Something constructed, told, spoken, not simply found (Hall, 1992a; 1992b). Moreover, signifying

particular bodies as 'colored' has real material consequences for those who are so named and represented.

Now let me return to Kristeva. A postcolonial interpretation of Kristeva's (1986) theory of how the sign or representation of 'woman' is constructed enables me to analyse the 'difference' within the category 'woman' not only the relational 'difference' symbolically constructed between 'man' and 'woman'. Kristeva (1986) proposes that in the space of the postmodern nation, such as Australia, symbolic representation in the form of the sign of 'woman' is constituted in and through three temporal relations. Kristeva's three temporal relations can be described as:

(1) Monumental time (eternity) - which produces a sign or symbol with an inherited history (mythology, religious beliefs, scientific discourses). So for example, the sign of 'woman' in monumental time refers to the biblical representations of woman, 'woman' as inferior to 'man' in Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest, 'black woman's' sexual deviancy as incorporated in the theories of nineteenth century medicine and science.³

(2) Cyclic time - which represents the biological difference of woman to man which is understood, interpreted or read in specific ways. The cycles, the biological rhythm of woman which conforms to that of nature has often been interpreted as a 'natural difference' to the norm of man.

(3) Linear or cursive time - which is the time of language, enunciation, a sequence of words from the space of articulation to the site of performance or reception. It is within linear or cursive time and space that the gendered sign is disrupted and reconstructed.

Consequently, the present of women's time (monumental, cyclical and linear) is a zone of representational instability. That is, the representation of women in and through the sign 'woman' becomes the site of continual challenge and reconstruction. It is from this instability of cultural signification that the literary canon comes to be articulated as a dialectic of various temporalities - modern, colonial, postcolonial, feminist, post feminist, poststructural feminism(s), 'native', traditional - that cannot be a knowledge that is stabilized in enunciation. In this time, 'woman' does not signify the female body as an *a priori* historical presence, a discursive object; but a discursive subject constructed in the performance of the narrative.

The gendered sign constructed in the grandnarratives, literary canon of patriarchal discourses is constantly disrupted in performance. The repetition of the gendered sign in discourses of

patriarchy is disrupted in linear or cursive time (Kristeva, 1986) by discourses of difference - gendered difference, racialised difference, homosexual difference, socio-economic difference. The space of representation threatens the binary division of grandnarratives with its difference, its 'Othering', through the continual production and re-articulation of difference. The signs of difference - women, minorities - move from the space of the 'Other', the margin and disrupt the centre. The 'Other' has to be faced, difference has to be incorporated. Difference can no longer be 'Othered' (Bhabha, 1992; Kristeva, 1986).

This is the representational space of women's double time. By the concept double time I mean that the sign of 'woman' is not simply or automatically reproduced as 'object of patriarchy'. Rather, the sign of 'woman' is contested and challenged by different women in and through their practices, for example, their speaking and writing practices.

The gendered sign produced in the pedagogic discourses of the literary canon, the grand cultural narratives is not simply reproduced in linear time, in representational space. The gendered sign is re-written in the representational space of performance. And this re-writing, re-articulation of the gendered sign doubles back to the space of pedagogic discursive construction, the grand narratives, as an 'add-on' which cannot be re-incorporated within the totalising boundaries of patriarchy. That is, feminist, postcolonial, Indigenous women's writing cannot be simply added onto the master discourses. By their very nature, these counter-discourses disrupt the workings of patriarchy and colonialism.

In addition, the different voices of women disrupt any attempt to stabilise meaning around 'universal womanhood'. The sign of 'woman' is continually the site of contestation and struggle because it constitutes the site of identity construction. In the postmodern nation difference is incorporated within the category 'woman' and is signified by a succession of plurals such as white, Anglo, black, colored, Indigenous, Asian, mentally and physically challenged, lesbian etc. Such a pluralism where difference returns as the same, is contested by the signifier's 'loss of identity' that inscribes the narrative of woman in the ambivalent, 'double' writing of the performative and the pedagogical (Irigaray, 1993). That is, the sign of woman can no longer signify the universal experiences of all women. At the same time, incorporating difference by words such as black, physically and mentally challenged, lesbian etc challenges the very meaning of the sign 'woman'. The differences of woman cannot be simply dismissed and incorporated back into the liberal notion that we are all individual women with our individual differences. The differences produced by social, historical, cultural and economic circumstances which constitute different categories of 'woman' can never be incorporated back into the universal sign of 'woman' - women who experience 'similar oppressions' under patriarchy.

Different groups of women do not experience the same kinds of oppressions. Patriarchy takes on different forms and is realised in different ways for different groups of women. That is, the experiences of racialised, ethnicised women are profoundly different from those of white bourgeois women and are manifested in profoundly different social, cultural and economic practices.

This does not mean however, that under some political circumstances the symbolic category 'women as a collective' should not be evoked to make a strategic, political difference. But the question must always be posed - in whose interests is difference and commonality being celebrated?

Now if I go back the text '*Discourses on gender and literacy: Changing the stories*' (Gilbert, 1993 August) I can demonstrate how this particular text through the use of a specific reading of Kristeva's theoretical model disrupts and alters the workings of patriarchy. Woman is not simply added on as an afterthought in the discourses of patriarchy but significantly disrupts the workings of this discourse. Similarly, my challenge of opening up the category of 'woman' to examine the racial and socio-economic differences within 'woman' means that the sign of woman can no longer return as the same. In Kristeva's terms the racialised or black woman is not simply the negative or silent other of white woman.

It is from this position that I urge feminists who are re-writing patriarchal discourses to examine the contradictions within the gendered subject - the *difference* within the symbolic category 'woman', the voices of minority women, the supplementary discourses which refuse to be 'added on', discourses which disrupt and fragment the pedagogic discourse of feminisms (hooks, 1991). In Kristeva's (1986: 193) own words:

... the time has perhaps come to emphasize the multiplicity of female expressions and preoccupations so that from the intersection of these differences there might arise ... the *real fundamental differences* between the two sexes.

Summary

In this paper I have proposed that critical feminist theory (*specifically* Gilbert, 1993 August) has contributed significantly to an analysis of the social construction of gender within schooling and literacy practices. However, I argue that the construction of gender deployed within this corpus of work is not inclusive because it does not theorise the differences within the category 'woman'. I propose an alternative reading of Kristeva which enables the multiplicity and differences within the category 'woman' to be articulated. If critical feminist theory is to achieve its objective of democratising literacy and schooling practices, then it is imperative that we hear and not suppress the voices of all women.

Endnotes

1. Leanora Spry reminds me continually of the public representations of non-white women in a colour conscious society such as Australia.
2. The experiences of gendered ethnic subjectivity in postcolonial spaces and times have been captured well in the following literary works:

Ang, L. (1983). *The butcher's wife*. London: Penguin.

Castro, B. (1983). *Birds of passage*. Sydney: George Allen & Unwin.

Hong Kingston, M. (1981). *The woman warrior. Memories of a girlhood among ghosts*.

Seth, V. (1993). *A suitable boy*. London: Phoenix.

Tan, A. (1989). *The Joy Luck Club*. London: Mandarin.

Tan, A. (1991). *The Kitchen God's Wife*. London: Flamingo.

Xiaoqui, D. (1993). *Maidenhome*. Melbourne: Hyland House Fiction.

Yahp, B. (1994) *In 1964*. In W. Jenkins (Ed.). *Reading from the Left*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press.

3. Sander Gilman (1992) argues that Virey and Cuvier in the early nineteenth century summarized their (and their contemporaries) views on the sexual nature of black females in terms of acceptable medical discourse. These discourses, which attribute a primitive sexuality to black women, have been reconstructed into different versions of racist discourses today.

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